**Ananias and Saphira**

The record of Matthew chapter 24 describes the words of Messiah concerning the coming day of judgment upon Israel:

“… then let them which be of Judea flee into the mountains: Let him which is upon the housetop not come down to take anything out of his house: Neither let him which is in the field return back to take his clothes. And woe unto them that are with child, and to them that give suck in those days” (Mat. 24:16-19).

The situation was clear: whatever possessions they had in the land would be taken from them, and they would have to flee for their lives. But what about those who heeded Messiah’s warning, and were land-owners? Surely they too would lose their land! The logical thing to do then, would be to sell their land – and the only people who would buy it would have been those who disregarded the Master’s words. In fact, that is exactly what they did: they sold their lands, and used the proceeds to support the needy within the growing ecclesia:

“… Neither was there any among them that lacked: for ***as many as were possessors of lands or house sold them,*** and brought the prices of the things that were sold, And laid them down at the apostle’s feet: and distribution was made unto every man according as he had need” (Acts 4:34-35).

This, then, is the background to the actions of Ananias and Sapphira. They also sold their land, but rather than to donate everything to the poor fund, they chose to only give a certain, unspecified amount. There was nothing wrong with them doing this: the money was theirs, and they could use it as they chose – and Peter said as much. What was wrong, is that they lied about it; they claimed to have given everything, but actually they did not. It is written that “When thou vowest a vow unto God, defer not to pay it; for he hath no pleasure in fools: pay that which thou hast vowed. Better is it that thou shouldest not vow, than that thou shouldest vow and no pay” (Eccl. 5:4-5). They had vowed to give all that they had, but in the event did not pay.

***THE TRESPASS OF ACHAN***

This spirit emerges a number of times in Scripture. When Israel were a fledgling nation, they went in to possess the land promised to their fathers, and were commanded to devote all the spoils of war to destruction. There was a twofold significance of this: firstly Yahweh himself was to be recognised as the source of all that they had, so the firstfruits, as it were, were to be devoted in Divine service. And secondly, it demonstrated that the ways of sin were to be destroyed as a condition of their dwelling in the land. So the people were straitly charged:

“… and ye, in any wise keep yourselves from the accursed thing, lest ye make yourselves accursed, when ye take of the accursed thing, and make the camp of Israel a curse, and trouble it. But all the silver, and gold, and vessels of brass and iron, are consecrated unto Yahweh: they shall come into the treasury of Yahweh” (Josh. 6:18-19).

So it was, that everything was devoted to Yahweh – some items devoted (accursed) to destruction, others to be used in the future tabernacle service. But the people unwittingly harboured a man who kept some back. Achan was tempted by the things of the world, and took of the accursed thing:

“But the children of Israel committed a trespass in the accursed thing: for Achan, the son of Carmi, the son of Zabdi, the son of Zerah, of the tribe of Judah, took of the accursed thing: and the anger of Yahweh was kindled against the children of Israel” (Josh. 7:1).

Here, the claim was that all was to belong to Yahweh, with certain items to be destroyed, others purified by fire. But Achan “transgressed the covenant of Yahweh” and “wrought folly in Israel” (vs15). He stole, and sinned against God – as he confessed:

“When I saw among the spoils a goodly Babylonish garment, and two hundred shekels of silver, and a wedge of gold of fifty shekels weight, then I coveted them; and behold, they are hid in the earth in the midst of my tent, and the silver under it” (Josh. 7:21).

The consequence of Achan’s deception was death. He was stoned: “all Israel stoned him with stones, and burned the with fire, after they had stoned them with stones. And they raised over him a great heap of stones unto this day. So Yahweh turned from the fierceness of his anger. Wherefore the name of that place was called, The valley of Achor unto this day” (Josh. 7:25-26). Such was the penalty of taking that which had been vowed to Yahweh, and lying about it: the soul that sinned would surely die.

***SAUL AND AMALEK***

Another example, not dissimilar to that of Achan, is the case of king Saul, who was also called upon to devote the Amalekites to destruction, yet who kept the best for himself. The commandment was given:

“Thus saith Yahweh of hosts, I remember that which Amalek did to Israel, how he laid wait for him in the way, when he came up from Egypt.  Now ***go and smite Amalek,***and utterly destroy all that they have, and spare them not; but slay both man and woman, infant an suckling, ox and sheep, camel and ass” (1 Sam. 15:2-3).

But instead of utterly smiting the power of sin, he spared those items that would be profitable for his use:

“But Saul and the people spared Agag, and the best of the sheep, and of the oxen, and of the fatlings, and the lambs, and all that was good, and would not utterly destroy them: but everything that was vile and refuse, that they destroyed utterly” (1 Sam. 15:9).

Again, isn’t this just like our experience with Sin? Here we seen Human Nature exemplified.  It is easy to cut out of our lives those things which seem not to confer any benefit, or which we take no pleasure in.  But those things that seem to us to be “good” are much harder to remove.  “Make not provision for the flesh, to fulfil the lusts thereof” (Rom. 13:14) is the Father’s Command, and by the very definition of what those lusts are, this will inevitably mean removing from our lives some of those things that we find ourselves attractive to, and which we desire.  Saul desired those things that Yahweh had appointed to destruction, in a manner not dissimilar to that of Achan, who desired the riches of Jericho. The commandment was to utterly destroy everything to do with Amalek, but Saul saved the best alive, with the claim (whether true or otherwise) that the intention was to use them in service to Yahweh.  Again, we can find a parallel of our own experience: it is possible to convince ourselves that a sin is acceptable if we can use it as part of our service to our God.  Like the person who reasoned that gambling is not wrong, so long as we give our winnings to the Lord’s service.  The point is that Yahweh has decreed certain things to be destroyed out of our lives, and we are wrong to keep them alive under the guise of using them to serve Him.

***SELLING POSSESSIONS***

Returning to our reading in Acts, the faithful sold and gave to the Master’s service, to provide for the needs of the early ecclesia. The spirit is that which the Lord commanded a certain rich man:

“Jesus said unto him, If thou wilt be perfect, go and sell that thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come and follow me” (Mat. 19:21).

As we mentioned earlier, when the Roman armies were brought against Israel, they were going to lose everything anyway, so it made sense to sell it, and use the funds to help the needy.

It could be argued that once a person had sold their possessions, they would need to keep some back in order to sustain themselves in the lands of their dispersion. But that would be to trust in riches, rather than to God. Paul exhorted Timothy:

“charge them that are rich in this world, that they be not highminded, nor trust in the uncertainty of riches, but in the living God, who giveth us richly all things to enjoy: that they do good, that they be rich in good works, ready to distribute …” (1 Tim. 6:17).

Yahweh is the source and provider of all that we have: if we use our worldly wealth to support the poor, He is able to provide for both.

But as we have seen, the case of Ananias and Sapphira was slightly different, in their sin was not holding back a certain amount – that was their prerogative. Rather, it was the fact that they lied about it. Hence Peter issued the rebuke:

“… ***why hath Satan filled thine heart to lie*** to the Holy Spirit, and to keep back part of the price of the land? Whiles it remained, was it not thine own? And after it was sold, was it not in thine own power? ***Why hast thou conceived this thing in thine heart?***  Thou hast not lied unto men, but unto God” (Act 5:3-4).

As an aside, this case is also helpful when dealing with those who believe in a personal devil: there is a parallelism here: “why hath Satan filled thine heart” is equal to: “why hast thou conceived this thing in thine heart”. James informs us that: “every man is tempted, when he is tempted of his own lust, and enticed. Then when lust hath conceived, it bringeth forth sin: and sin, when it is finished, bringeth forth death” (Jas. 1:15). So it was that having conceived the sinful desire, this man and his wife conspired to lie to the Holy Spirit, and for both of them, these actions brought about their premature death. As the Psalmist has it: “… thou lovest evil more than good, and lying rather than to speak righteousness” (Psa. 52:3).

Of Israel, Yahweh spake through Hosea: “therefore have I hewn them by the prophets [cp. Samuel and Agag], I have slain them by the words of my mouth” (Hos. 6:5), and this was the case of Ananias and Sapphira before Peter. He only had to speak the word, and they dropped down dead. Dying in their sins, they made no confession, and were cursed by the words of the Lord’s Apostle. Indeed, as another aside, similar words are used to describe the judgment to come upon the earth:

“… he shall smite the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips shall he slay the wicked” (Isa. 11:4).

“… and out of his mouth goeth a sharp sword, that with it he should smite the nations and he shall rule them with a rod of iron …” (Rev. 19:15).

***A LIVING SACRIFICE***

Rather than to take, and desire to have, the remit of the disciple is to give: and to do so willingly and with great rejoicing for the privilege of being able to help. So Romans chapter 12 encourages us to present ourselves wholly to the service of our God:

“I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to unto God, which is your reasonable service: (Rom. 12:1).

Again:

“he that giveth, let him do it liberally (marg.) … let love be without dissimulation. Abhor that which is evil, cleave to that which is good … distributing to the necessity of saints, given to hospitality ..” (Rom. 12:8, 9, 13 – but see whole chapter).

Rather than to take in order to fulfil the lust of the flesh, like Achan, Saul, and Ananias & Sapphira, we must give all that we have in the service of the Lord: “Every man according as he purposeth in his heart, so let him give; not grudgingly, or of necessity: for God loveth a cheerful giver” (2 Cor. 9:7). Let us be wise, and give all that we have in Divine service, for then by casting our bread upon the waters, we shall receive it again in the day to come (see Eccl. 11:1).

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